

Your Piano

Whenever you look at your piano, one of the first things which attracts your attention is the keyboard, with its long row of white and black keys. The keyboard is certainly a wonderful invention. By pressing a key you set in motion the mechanism which produces a tone. Thus you are saved the problem of bowing or blowing as on other instruments. Moreover, the arrangement of the black keys in groups of twos and threes makes it a simple matter to find the correct key and to learn the different scales.



The Child Handel

We do not know who invented the keyboard. Probably it was used first on some ancient kind of organ. But we know that it was used on early types of stringed instruments during the time of Guido d'Arezzo (12th century), the man who was largely responsible for organizing the musical scales as we use them today.

The piano is comparatively a new instrument, because it is not much more than two hundred years old. Before the piano, though, several types of keyboard instruments were widely used, such as the spinet (sometimes called the virginal), the clavichord, and the harpsichord.

Both the spinet and the clavichord were sometimes quite small, and the tone was very dainty and light. The harpsichord was larger and more elaborate, with a fuller tone. But in these early instruments there were two very grave defects — the tone died away almost as soon as sounded, and there was little variety in the loudness and softness of the tone. Even so, a great deal of beautiful music was written for these old-fashioned instruments, such as Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavichord," and many compositions by Haendel.

When the piano was invented by Cristofori (1709) these two problems were largely solved, although, of course, even a piano tone may be sustained only a relatively brief time. At first the instrument was called the *piano-forte*, which means "soft-loud," to show that it could produce tones of different volume.

Just what causes the piano to make a tone? The piano key belongs to a part of the instrument called its *action*. When you press the key, the action causes a felt *hammer* to strike a wire stretched across the *soundboard*. Then the hammer rebounds and leaves the wire free to vibrate. It is the vibration of the piano wire, strengthened in volume by means of the soundboard, which produces the tone that we hear.